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***The Alchemist* and Medieval Faerie Romance**

The Alchemist is, in many respects, a typical example of Jonsonian stagecraft. It is a satirical city comedy focusing on a realistic urban setting (a London townhouse); it has a narrative arc that develops via the intermingling of disparate social groups from a variety of class backgrounds; and it is a play that emphasizes a fascination with money as the common driving factor for each character.¹ Financial speculation, in particular, has often been considered an overriding characteristic of much of Jonson's work.² In *The Alchemist*, this preoccupation is best expressed through Sir Epicure Mammon, a character whose very name indicates a taste for excess and material wealth. Amongst the many delights and indulgences that Mammon imagines himself possessing are mirrors cut into "subtle angles", through which to glimpse his naked body and his extensive collection of lascivious art; enough money to cuckold any wealthy man's wife, should he try to do so; dishes of carp's tongues, dormice, and camel's heels, boiled in a distillate of gold and dissolved pearl; and poets, whom he will employ specifically to write fart poetry (2.2.41-87).³

Jonson's preoccupation with money, along with a focus on urban settings and the intermixing of different social strata, has often been used by critics who wish to indicate the playwright's dislike of romance as a literary mode. His skepticism regarding anything supernatural and his use of sham magical practices to emphasize the gullibility of characters (particularly in *The Alchemist*) suggest that he had little time for the kind of marvelous encounters that feature in, for example, Arthurian quest narratives. For the most part, this approach to Jonson's work has developed from a brief note in the *Informations to William Drummond of Hawthornden*, in which Drummond suggests that "Spenser's stanzas pleased

[Jonson] not, nor his matter".⁴ Accordingly, critics such as Herford and Simpson (1925), Frances Yates (1975), and David Norbook (1984) have tended to emphasize Jonson's distaste for the matter of romance and, in particular, his distaste for Spenser's archaic style of writing. However, in the last twenty years or so this view has started to change, with more critics beginning to see romance as one of many influences that helped to shape Jonson's work.⁵ We know, after all, that Jonson engaged with works by medieval authors. In *Discoveries*, he writes that a good master must be careful of 'letting [young pupils] taste Gower or Chaucer at first, lest falling too much in love with antiquity, and not apprehending the weight, they grow rough and barren in language only' (1276-8). Jonson recommends caution when reading antiquated texts, particularly for those learning to write in English, but he also sees them as works with value and artistic merit, works that should be included alongside Classical and contemporary literature as part of a well-rounded education.

This article argues that Jonson's familiarity with romance can be read in his appropriation of certain faerie motifs that are derived, at least in part, from Arthurian quest narratives of the Middle Ages.⁶ Amongst its diverse plotlines and intermingling character arcs, *The Alchemist* includes a narrative thread in which Subtle (masquerading as a learned doctor) agrees to help Dapper the clerk to meet with the "Queen of Fairy" (1.2.126). During these scenes, Dapper is persuaded that Doll the prostitute is really his faerie aunt, that Face and Subtle's chattering and pinching are the teasing antics of the faerie queen's train, and that an odorous privy is actually the queen's perfumed antechamber. Dapper's gulling at the hands of the three cozeners appears to be an example of Jonson's skepticism with regard to the supernatural and his mockery of individuals who are susceptible to such beliefs. However, there is also an extent to which Jonson is framing Dapper's encounter with the supernatural by building on conventions associated with the quest narratives of romance. Doll's faerie

queen is a deception, but she still demonstrates certain romance tropes, particularly in relation to themes of wealth and aristocracy, and the function of faeries as related to human morality. Jonson's ability to draw on these tropes suggests a familiarity with (and even an affection for) romance that has, in the past, been obscured by an emphasis on his knowledge of Classical literature. By exploring Jonson's intertextual engagement with heroic quest narratives, highlighting both the continuities and differences between romance and Jonson's own work, we can perhaps better appreciate the meaning of the faerie queen episodes within *The Alchemist*.

About "faeries"

Helen Cooper's work on "memes" in *The English Romance in Time* serves as a useful starting point for illuminating the role that faeries play within medieval romance narratives.⁷ For Cooper, recurring themes and motifs (memes) function as consistent images or rules that can be relied on to convey meaning or to uphold conventions of a particular mode or genre. The use of these memes mutates gradually over time as authors adapt, or subvert, a particular image to fit different agendas or to challenge audience expectations. Despite such repurposing, Cooper argues for a significant continuity in the way that recurring conventions, such as the appearance of faeries in romance, are used from the twelfth century right the way through to the early seventeenth century. Thus, whilst critics such as James Wade have correctly argued that one of the defining characteristics of faeries is their ability to defy any attempts at categorization or explanation (either in terms of visual appearance, ontology, or moral predilection), their function in romance literature relies on a set of conventions that remain largely consistent throughout both the medieval and early modern periods.⁸

Amongst the motifs commonly associated with faeries in medieval romance are an association with wilderness settings (forests, streams, caves, islands), an emphasis on isolation as a precursor to an encounter, a focus on excess and luxury, a predilection for gift giving on the part of the faerie, and an emphasis on either supernatural beauty or monstrosity (sometimes both) as defining characteristics of a faerie's appearance. In the Middle English *Sir Launfal* (late fourteenth century), for example, a young knight abandons King Arthur's court and rides to the edge of a forest where he encounters a beautiful faerie, residing in a pavilion decorated with pommels of crystal and topped by a sculpted golden eagle with rubies for eyes (265-76).⁹ The faerie, named Dame Tryamour, offers Launfal her love and endless riches in exchange for his promise that he will never disclose her existence to anyone. Launfal agrees and is accordingly showered with gifts, but when he returns to King Arthur's court, he reveals the existence of his faerie mistress to Guinevere, declaring Tryamour to be even more beautiful than the queen (a bold claim within a literary mode that tends to link beauty with nobility). As a result, Launfal is brought to trial where he must prove his mistress' supreme beauty, but his broken promise to her means that he is no longer able to call on her at will. The story concludes when Tryamour appears at the court anyway, proving her beauty without question, blinding Guinevere (for reasons that aren't entirely clear), and then returning to the otherworld, accompanied by Launfal.

In addition to demonstrating certain motifs that are conventionally attributed to the appearance of faeries in romance, this story also draws attention to a common function of faeries as literary devices. In almost all instances, faeries are encountered by young questing knights, and the encounter invariably centers around a test of the protagonist's ethical or spiritual resolve.¹⁰ In *Launfal*, for example, emphasis is placed on the hero's fidelity to his love and his inability to keep a promise, but in breaking that promise he also compromises the

fidelity he owes to King Arthur by questioning Guinevere's beauty. Tryamour's appearance in the story thus serves as a means of examining certain social conventions attributed to knighthood and aristocracy, both within the Arthurian setting of the story and amongst the author's own society. In a sense, the liminal position that faeries inhabit – on the borders of what it means to be human and situated on a moral spectrum somewhere between angels and demons – allows them to serve as a mirror to the established world of the aristocratic court, testing the rules and values that help to define that particular culture.

Similar examples of faeries (or faerie-like figures) appearing as moral arbiters can be found throughout the tradition of Arthurian romance. In Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Conte du Graal*, Perceval's failure to ask about the grail procession in the hidden castle of the Fisher King is attributed to the sin he committed in abandoning his dying mother; in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain's moral convictions are put to the test by an ambiguous, shapeshifting figure in a castle that mysteriously materializes in a forest; and in Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, a monstrous hag/beautiful maiden transforms a knight convicted of rape into one who values women's sovereignty in love. Whilst many faeries vary significantly in character and appearance, even to the extent that labelling them as faeries can sometimes prove problematic (each of the examples above have a certain ambiguity in this respect), there is a level of consistency in the repeated use of themes and motifs employed to contextualize these encounters. Each of the above examples features liminal settings, isolation, exquisite wealth and luxury, some form of gift giving, and an emphasis on extreme beauty or monstrosity. Similarly, each of these encounters foreground the testing of chivalric values as an integral part of the hero's journey toward self-realization.

Scholarship concerning faeries in early modern literature and drama, on the other hand, has tended to focus on the faeries' association with demonology, folklore, and domestic

or rural superstition.¹¹ Indeed, for most critics, romance is barely worth mentioning in light of the far more significant impact that an increasingly vocal and culturally engaged “middling sort” were having on “popular” culture at the time.¹² Shakespeare, in particular, has been the focus of much critical attention in this regard. Plays such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Winter’s Tale* have all been highlighted as examples of Shakespeare’s interest in folkloric belief and superstition, most notably in the case of Puck in *Dream*, who represents a version of the domestic hobgoblin Robin Goodfellow. In addition to this, faeries on the early modern stage tend to be associated with comedy or light-heartedness, resulting in figures who, whilst still troublesome and mischievous, are rarely as dangerous or frightening as the entities that we come across in earlier works of romance. None of Shakespeare’s faeries come close to evoking the sense of fear associated with the threat of decapitation that looms over Gawain’s encounter with the Green Knight, for example. Nor is there any imagery to match the grotesque nature of the faerie king’s courtyard of corpses in *Sir Orfeo*.

In thinking about romance faeries on the early modern stage, Regina Buccola has drawn some attention to the connection between faeries and aristocratic culture in *The Alchemist*. For Buccola, Jonson’s incorporation of romance-inspired themes (associated with Spenser and the Cult of Elizabeth) alongside negative or subversive faerie attributes (demonology, superstition, and con-artistry) suggests a revelry in the complex, problematic image of the faerie in early modern culture.¹³ Unlike Spenser (or writers of court entertainments such as Thomas Churchyard), Jonson does not try to separate out less-desirable faerie attributes from those associated with monarchy. However, much of Buccola’s argument focuses on the close link between faeries, women, and the lower classes, exploring the way that faeries give licence to the author to confront certain socioreligious or

religiopolitical conventions, particularly in relation to gender politics or religious reform. Building on arguments developed by Diane Purkiss (2000), Wendy Wall (2002), and Mary Ellen Lamb (2006), Buccola emphasises the central role that lower class, female servants had in disseminating ideas about faeries throughout early modern culture.¹⁴ Partly for this reason, she sees the faeries of the stage as primarily a product of popular faerie belief rather than aristocratic culture and romance.

I would argue that the transition from medieval romance faeries to domestic folklore on the early modern stage is more complex than previous treatises on the subject have suggested. Whilst folklore and rural tradition are central to the depiction of early modern faeries in drama, the impact that romance had on the representation of these supernatural entities over the previous four hundred years (as well as in contemporary works such as Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*) cannot be easily set aside. Nor is it entirely possible to separate out those aspects of faerie ontology that originate in folklore as opposed to conventions that derive from romance, there being so many points at which the two converge.¹⁵ The popularity of romance in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods is a widely understood and well documented aspect of early modern culture (both in relation to literature and drama), and yet there has been almost nothing written about this influence when it comes to faeries on the early modern stage.

Romance and the early modern stage

Medieval romance remained in circulation throughout Jonson's life, thanks largely to a burgeoning print trade and the widespread popularity of new printed editions of medieval texts, broadside ballads, and abbreviated chapbook editions of romance tales. In addition,

works such as Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and Philip Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* established a new tradition of romance, helping to reinvigorate its cultural cachet amongst authors and audiences alike. In the specific context of drama, we might draw attention to plays that adapt, or take their influences from, romance. The Folger Shakespeare Library's *Lost Plays Database* and Wiggins and Richardson's *British Drama, 1533-1642* are useful resources in this regard, demonstrating the extent to which romance was adapted and performed on the stage, particularly during the last decades of the sixteenth century. Amongst the plays recorded in these catalogues are various romance titles, including "The Red Knight" (1576, a possible adaptation of the Middle English *Sir Perceval of Galles*), "Huon of Bordeaux" (1593), "Palamon and Arcite" (1594, adapted from Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*), and "Tristram de Lyons" (1599), as well as several plays with intriguing titles such as "Delphrygus and the King of the Fairies" (possibly 1570s) and "Fairy Knight" (1624).¹⁶

Many of these plays, and particularly those from the early years of the permanent stage, have been lost. However, one surviving example that we can draw upon is *The Tragical History, Admirable Achievements and Various Events of Guy Earl of Warwick*. The play is a partial adaptation of the legend of Guy of Warwick, a story that first appears in its entirety in the early thirteenth-century, Anglo-Norman *Gui de Warewic*. However, Guy's legend remained popular well into the early modern period, surviving in a number of different forms including prints adapted from surviving Middle English versions of the story by Richard Pynson (c.1500) and William Copland (c.1565), several ballad versions published throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and Samuel Rowland's *The Famous Historie of Guy, Earl of Warwick* (1607).¹⁷ The author and date of composition of the play are uncertain. It was first published in 1661 by Thomas Vere and William Gilbertson, but scholars generally agree that it was written much earlier than this, with most suggesting a date in the early-to-mid

1590s. Helen Cooper, for example, highlights some key features of the play that help to situate it within this time period. These include a prominent Marlovian verse style, Sparrow the clown's similarity to characters such as Strumbo in *Locrine* (1594) and Mouse in *Mucedorus* (1590), and a possible connection to contemporary events, including Shakespeare's publication of *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and the Marprelate controversy (1588-9).¹⁸

With regard to authorship, there is a very slim chance that *Guy Earl of Warwick* was written by Ben Jonson. The author's initials on the title page are "B. J." and, for this reason, the play might represent a very early attempt (perhaps even a first attempt) at playwriting for a young Ben Jonson barely out of his teens.¹⁹ However, whilst confirmation of Jonson's authorship would be beneficial to any scholar interested in his engagement with romance materials, this connection is rarely given credence. The style of the play (a sweeping romance of the kind that Jonson would later criticize in *The Magnetic Lady*), and the lack of evidence connecting him to its production make his authorship unlikely. It is more probable that Vere and Gilbertson included the initials in their publication as an advertising ploy, intending to evoke the best-known playwright of the age in an attempt to increase sales.²⁰

Regardless of the exact identity of the author (or authors), it is clear that the intention was to adapt a popular story that had already been widely disseminated in various printed romances, broadside ballads, and chapbooks, and that may even have been familiar to the audience through earlier staged productions as well.²¹ Therefore, the play, which focuses on the second half of Guy's life (his pilgrimage, his fight with Colbron the giant, his life as a hermit, and his death), spends relatively little time establishing the context for his adventures. We learn, in a brief chorus delivered by Time, that Guy has fought with the "sauage Bore of Caledon" and the "wild Cow on Dunsmore Heath" (1.22-51), and that he has married Felice (here called "Phillis"), daughter of the previous Earl of Warwick, inheriting the title of Earl for

himself. The brevity of this introduction suggests that the author expected his audience to be familiar with the subject matter already. Indeed, he seems to play on this assumption at various points in the performance. One example is when Sparrow, Guy's clownish companion, mistakenly greets Oberon, king of the faeries, by asking "Little Gentleman is your name King *Colbron*?" (2.516). The moment allows Sparrow to poke fun at the faerie king's height by confusing him with the giant Colbron, but it also builds on the audience's anticipation of future events by having Sparrow unwittingly foreshadow Guy's fight with Colbron later in the story. Sparrow's outrage at having been set upon by faeries and his declaration that they have killed him "in the Buttock" (2.509) is thus also an acknowledgement of the audience's familiarity with the subject matter. The fear and anger expressed by Sparrow in these lines reflect the very real peril that encounters with faeries could engender in medieval romance, but here the joke is on Sparrow: the two are never in any real danger and the faerie troop prove to be entirely benevolent.

This scene, in which Guy is freed from the spell of a wicked enchanter by Oberon and his faerie troop, does not appear in any of the legends of Guy of Warwick. Indeed, earlier versions of Guy's story are notable for their lack of reference to faeries or journeys into the secular otherworld. Instead, the source for this particular passage comes from *Huon of Bordeaux*, a French medieval romance that would have been just as well-known to early modern audiences thanks to a popular translation by John Bouchier (Lord Berners), first published in the 1540s.²² The familiarity of early modern audiences with the character of Oberon was also widespread enough at this time to require little in the way of explanation for his identification as the faerie king. Further examples of his appearance in early modern theatre and poetry, such as Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-6), Ben Jonson's *Oberon, the Faery Prince* (1611), and Michael Drayton's *Nymphidia* (1627), attest to

the continuing popularity of this character across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Still, the scene itself fits uncomfortably into a play that otherwise focuses on Guy's holy pilgrimage and his search for salvation. Indeed, his role at this point is almost entirely passive, as he falls victim to an enchanter's charm in the first place and is only revived by the seemingly happenstance appearance of Oberon and his troop: hardly the kind of behavior expected of an adventuring romance hero.

It is likely, therefore, that the inclusion of this scene in *Guy Earl of Warwick* has more to do with pandering to assumed audience expectations than it does with advancing Guy's penitential narrative arc or contributing to his prestige as a chivalrous knight. In essence, Oberon and his faerie troop appear in the play because both the author and the audience expect faeries to feature in heroic quest narratives (even if they do not appear in previous versions of the story). If this is the case, then to what extent do these faeries reflect the function of their medieval counterparts? On the one hand, it is clear that Oberon does not represent the same challenges to Guy's moral integrity that typify encounters with faeries in medieval romance. However, whilst Guy does not undergo the same trials, we might still draw attention to the different treatments of Guy and Sparrow at the hands of Oberon's faeries. Guy, an exemplar of the medieval chivalric ideal, is treated with honor and respect by the faerie troop. As with various versions of the Grail narrative, we read Guy's journey as a progression away from the trappings of martial prowess and courtly love and toward a heightened emphasis on piety and spiritual devotion. Although Oberon does not function as a moral arbiter in the same way that many other faerie characters do, his involvement with Guy (rescuing him from enchantment and guiding him to the Holy Land) still helps to structure the hero's attempt to amalgamate different aspects of his knightly persona into a single, unified ideal (turning his martial ability to the service of God).

Sparrow, by point of contrast, does not fare so well at the hands of the faeries. He first criticizes and insults them, declaring 'I care not what they be' and describing them as "whorson little pigpies", but when they set about him and begin pinching his body, Sparrow cries out to Guy in fear (499-505). The description of diminutive faeries who pinch their victims incorporates elements of a folkloric tradition that has been connected with faeries on the early modern stage by critics such as Katharine Briggs (1959), Minor Latham (1972), and Regina Buccola. However, in this context, it aids in exaggerating the moral and social gulf between the two characters. Sparrow is far more interested in filling his belly than he is with seeking salvation, demonstrating his courage, or conveying himself honorably. When Guy asks him to find an entrance to the enchanter's tower, he replies "I have a stomach like a Horse, but no heart in the world to go to such a break-fast" (416-7). Sparrow's encounter with faeries, and his subsequent pinching, thus helps to emphasize his unsuitability for romance. As is typical of clown characters from the 1590s (see, for example, Robin and Rafe in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*), he serves as a counterpoint to the central narrative arc: a character who has wandered into the wrong story, entirely out of place in this world of adventures, faeries, giants, and enchanted towers.

Doll, the faerie queen

The ongoing popularity of heroic quest narratives and faeries in examples such as *Guy Earl of Warwick* suggests that we should be paying closer attention to medieval romance as a source of inspiration for early modern drama. However, this still leaves us with the problem of how to conflate romance faeries with Jonson's seeming lack of interest in stories related to chivalry, piety, the supernatural, or the hero's search for self-realization. Indeed, Jonson

seems to have had little to no interest in the mythological or the supernatural, at least in the sense of it having any tangible existence within the worlds of his plays. As Ian Donaldson is quick to point out, Jonson's imaginative creations were a far cry from the "teasing, shadowy world that Shakespeare invokes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*".²³ That being said, there is an extent to which we might read his work as influenced by, or participating in, a culture that is still heavily governed by the themes and motifs of romance literature and its accompanying focus on the supernatural. As Donaldson goes on to argue, faeries were not entirely absent from Jonson's work. For example, in his *Entertainment at Althorp* an artificial ring was cut into a procession path to hint at the presence of faeries, even though Jonson reveals faerie rings to be human constructions later in the performance. The entertainment was written for Queen Anne and Prince Henry in 1603 and performed to celebrate their journey from Edinburgh to London. Donaldson states that

Jonson's device is a conscious rhetorical hyperbole, amused, sophisticated, half-ironical, signalling his belief not in the supernatural world but in the power of the new Stuart dynasty, which might (who knows?) call up the impossible fairies at that entrancing midsummer moment.²⁴

A similar point can be made regarding Jonson's masque *Oberon, The Faery Prince*, in which Prince Henry himself was said to have taken on the role of Oberon. As Mary Ellen Lamb has observed, this association between Oberon and Prince Henry seems to allude to Oberon (Henry VIII), father of Tanaquill (Queen Elizabeth), in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (2.10.76), suggesting that, in this particular instance, Jonson is drawing direct inspiration from a

romance source. What these two examples demonstrate is that, whilst Jonson may well have dismissed the credibility of faerie belief, the potency of faeries as a literary symbol was clearly still strong enough in his eyes to merit including them in his work when it suited his purpose.

Furthermore, criticism in the last twenty years or so has begun to re-evaluate Jonson's relationship with romance. Indeed, with the discovery of Jonson's heavily annotated edition of Spenser's folio (published in 1617), scholars such as James Riddell and Stanley Stewart have argued that Jonson not only liked the matter of Spenser's work, but also his language, his verse style, and even his propensity for copious, descriptive passages. In so doing, they argue that Jonson saw Spenser as part of a glorified English tradition of narrative verse that placed him in the exalted company of Chaucer, an accolade that no other contemporary (or near-contemporary) of Jonson's appeared to merit.²⁵ With this in mind, we might dispel the notion that Doll's faerie queen represents an indictment of Spenser and the romance tradition, or a direct attack on the Cult of Elizabeth and its association with faeries (as critics such as Frances Yates and David Norbook have suggested), and instead focus on Jonson's use of medieval literary conventions, already embedded within early modern society, as a means of exploring themes of class and wealth within a contemporary London townhouse setting.²⁶

As with most criticism interested in early modern faeries, approaches to Doll's faerie queen in *The Alchemist* have tended to focus on the significance of popular beliefs (or the lack thereof) as integral to understanding Jonson's motivation. Scholars such as Thomas Willard and Piotr Spyra, for example, emphasize the role that printed pamphlets played in popularizing the accounts of cozeners who conned their victims into giving up wealth in exchange for a meeting with the faeries.²⁷ Two accounts in particular, those of John and Alice West and of Judith Philips, share some interesting parallels with the rituals and preparations required of Dapper before he can meet with the faerie queen.²⁸ For both Willard and Spyra,

the inspiration for Jonson's faerie queen thus relates to his familiarity with contemporary accounts that associated faeries with con-artistry. However, Spyra also argues that Jonson's understanding of faerie lore was based on more than the contents of popular pamphlets. To this end, he cites instances from the play that appear to draw their inspiration from contemporary attitudes toward witchcraft and demonology (the familiar appearing in the shape of a fly), faeries and Catholicism (Subtle's role as the "*Priest of Fairy*"), and folkloric beliefs and superstitions (the link between faeries and hidden treasure).²⁹ These examples demonstrate that Jonson's awareness of the various beliefs surrounding faeries extended beyond the cozening pamphlets that represented faeries as linked to instances of trickery or deceit. Indeed, as Spyra suggests, no single source can comfortably account for "the manifold aspects of fairy belief" that appear to be represented within the play.³⁰

Medieval romance and its role in shaping Jonson's faerie queen does not feature in either Willard or Spyra's work.³¹ However, many of the influences that Spyra attempts to attribute to folklore (liminal spaces, the wealth of faerie kingdoms, the impact of the otherworld on mortals) might just as easily be derived from a prior knowledge of faeries in romance literature. Part of the problem here is that it is difficult to distinguish between the two due to an inevitable blending of ideas related to faeries across both high and low cultures.³² For example, Spyra suggests that the townhouse in *The Alchemist* evokes a certain liminality traditionally associated with settings such as hills or forests in faerie lore. By crossing over the threshold into the house (and so also onto the stage) the three cozeners and their various patrons are crossing into a parallel dimension, "a place both familiar and unfamiliar", that appears to morph and adapt from faerie court to alchemist's office depending on the con being enacted.³³ This liminality, he argues, also relates to the moral liminality of the folkloric faeries and their existence on a boundary between good and evil. However, both of these

associations with liminality (spatial and moral) are just as integral to representations of faeries in romance. To suggest that Jonson is drawing on one rather than the other here seems to imply a prior knowledge of Jonson's sources, sources that are far from clear.

What we can say for certain is that Doll's faerie queen reflects many of the qualities and characteristics of her medieval counterparts. Jonson's depiction of a human-sized faerie follows established themes and motifs such as wealth and status, moral ambiguity, and beauty: familiar tropes that must derive, at least in part, from the medieval tradition that dominated popular culture for the preceding four hundred years. Her royal status certainly seems to elevate her beyond the rural or domestic faeries of popular tradition, putting her on a par with characters such as Tryamour in *Sir Launfal*, the otherworldly king and queen of *Sir Orfeo*, Pluto and Proserpine in *The Merchant's Tale*, or Spenser's Gloriana. Allusions to the queen's status are enhanced further by the ceremony itself, which seems to be poking fun at the formality of aristocratic or religious ceremony as much as it plays on Dapper's susceptibility to faerie belief.

Subtle. Is yet her Grace's cousin come?

Face. He is come.

Subtle. And is he fasting?

Face. Yes.

Subtle. And hath cried 'hum'?

Face. Thrice, you must answer.

Dapper. Thrice.

Subtle. And as oft 'buzz'?

Face. If you have, say.

Dapper. I have.

Subtle. Then, to her coz:

Hoping that he hath vigeared [sic] his senses,

As he was bid[.]

(3.5.1-6)

Here, the chanting of “hum” and “buzz” suggests a kind of hocus pocus language comparable with Robin’s attempt to read Faustus’ book of necromancy in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* (A-Text): “*Sanctobulorum Periphrasticon!*” and “*Polypragmos Belseborums framanto pacostiphos tostus Mephistopheles!*” (3.2.25-7).³⁴ Marlowe’s comic subplot seems to be poking fun at Latin as the language of ritual magic as readily as it mocks Robin and Rafe for their ignorance. Likewise, Face and Subtle use nonsensical language and ceremony to evoke a sense of the courtly splendor and mystery that we find in representations of faeries throughout the romance tradition. They insist on a series of farcical rituals and observances that must be completed in order to appease the queen, whilst simultaneously stripping Dapper of any valuables in the process. For Jonson, whose life was spent divided between the urban City of London and the courtly world of Westminster, this scene may hint at his own relationship with the aristocracy, both as a source of patronage and social prestige, but also as an elite culture that demanded a certain amount of pandering and hoop-jumping in order to progress.³⁵

An emphasis on social standing is also made explicit through the cozeners’ continued insistence on Dapper’s relation to the faerie queen, connecting the clerk’s social-climbing aspirations with the discovery of a noble lineage. Dapper’s gullibility, a common source of humor throughout Jonson’s work, seems to derive from his familiarity with the hero’s arc in

romance, in which encounters with faeries lead to the acquisition of wealth and status (his intention, after all, is to obtain a faerie familiar that will help him to earn money while gambling). In this sense, his desired trajectory mirrors that of the fair unknown hero of medieval romance. Similar to characters such as Gareth in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* or Perceval in Chrétien's *Le Conte du Graal*, Dapper's noble ancestry has been concealed and can only be reinstated through a series of trials that will prove him worthy of the honor.

Dapper's association with the faerie queen thus seems to serve two distinct purposes within Jonson's play. On the one hand, he is an object of ridicule, a gull, susceptible to believing in faeries, familiars, and the magical potency of vinegar. The audience are able to laugh at his follies because they see the world of the play from the perspective of the three cozeners: Jonson's skepticism effectively becomes their own. However, Dapper is also a man attempting to raise his status in a society that deems transgressions of class to be a taboo. Jonson invites us to laugh knowingly at Dapper's ignorance whilst simultaneously recognizing his romance-inspired flight of fancy (the revelation of a hidden, noble identity). Of course, there is no risk of Dapper ever actually acquiring the new social status that he has been promised. As with Mosca's transgression of class boundaries in the final act of *Volpone*, Jonson is engaging with ideas related to social mobility that ultimately prove unfulfillable.³⁶ Dapper's interaction with the faerie queen corresponds to romance as a mode in which social hierarchies and the established values of courtly society might be put to the test, whilst simultaneously allowing for a return to the *status quo* by the narrative's conclusion. The use of romance motifs, associating faeries with wealth and aristocracy, in a play that simultaneously emphasizes a relationship between faeries and con-artistry, thus serves as another example (similar to Sir Epicure Mammon) of *The Alchemist's* ridiculing of those who aspire to new wealth and upward mobility.

Still, there is a limit to the extent to which we can read the influence of medieval faerie romance in Jonson's work. What we do not find within *The Alchemist* is any sense of moral accountability amongst its characters. For Anne Barton, Dapper is "a man carried away by the prospect of a new and more spacious life".³⁷ The construction of his "dream self" is shaped by the images of wealth and splendor that are implanted in his head by Subtle and Face. In one respect, this mirrors the emphasis placed on acquisition of wealth as one of the main benefits to be derived from encounters with faeries in medieval romance. Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* is a particularly gratuitous example of this: a story that seems to actively indulge in descriptions of the wealth and luxury that Launfal has access to whilst in favor with his faerie mistress. However, Doll's appearance as the faerie queen does not hinge on Dapper demonstrating certain ethical or spiritual values in quite the same way as it does in the case of Launfal or in similar examples of medieval romance. Rather, Jonson's subversion of the faerie motif in this instance suggests that faeries appear, not because Dapper needs to be tested, but because he has already shown himself to be flawed. Conventional romance values such as honor, martial prowess, love, and piety are not represented here because Jonson is not interested in people's virtues, he is interested in their failings. By recognizing romance as an influence in this instance, we draw attention to the way that Jonson is actively parodying a literary mode that equates wealth with goodness. Doll's faerie queen still draws attention to human values in much the same way that romance faeries do, but in Jonson's world that mirroring helps to reflect qualities associated primarily with greed and material gain.

Notes

¹ For more on city comedies and the role that Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton, and John Marston played in developing this theatrical genre, see Brian Gibbons, *Jacobean City Comedy: A Study of the Satiric Plays by Jonson, Marston and Middleton*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1980).

² Jonsonian criticism has drawn attention to the importance of commercial enterprise since L. C. Knights' *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937). See Christopher Burlinson, "Money and consumerism", in *Ben Jonson in Context*, ed. by Julie Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 281.

³ Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online*, ed. by Martin Butler et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). All works by Jonson hereafter cited in text.

⁴ William Drummond, *Informations to William Drummond of Hawthornden*, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, general eds. David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson, 7 Vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5:14.

⁵ See, in particular, James Riddell and Stanley Stewart's *Jonson's Spenser* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1995), and Ian Donaldson's *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶ I have chosen to use "faerie" rather than "fairy" throughout this article. My decision to adopt this Spenserian medievalism is part of an attempt to associate these supernatural figures with their literary origins in medieval romance, whilst simultaneously recognising the ongoing influence that faeries had as a literary motif well into the early modern period. In addition, by avoiding the term "fairy" I am endeavouring to avoid twenty-first-century associations with Tinkerbell and the whimsical, pixie-like fairies of contemporary popular culture.

⁷ Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁸ James Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁹ Thomas Chestre, *Sir Launfal*, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

¹⁰ Exceptions to this rule can be found in examples such as *Sir Degare*, *Sir Gowther*, and in different accounts of Merlin's birth, in which young women encounter (and are usually raped by) demonic or faerie spirits. In these instances, the faerie encounter results in the birth of a son who ultimately becomes the focus of the story.

¹¹ Key texts related to this argument include Katharine Briggs' *The Anatomy of Puck* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), M. W. Latham's *The Elizabethan Fairies* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), Diane Purkiss' *Troublesome Things* (London: Penguin, 2000), Wendy Wall's *Staging Domesticity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Mary Ellen Lamb's *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson* (London: Routledge, 2006), and Regina Buccola's *Fairies, Fractious Women and the Old Faith* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2006).

¹² Both of these terms are problematic, but for the general purposes of this article it should suffice to say that by "middling sort" I am referring in a broad sense to a group of people in the early modern period made up of yeoman, citizens, burgesses, and others of a similar status: a group distinct from the gentry and noblemen (the "better" or "richer" sort) on the one hand, and the labouring classes or "vulgar" sort on the other (although, as Keith Wrightson has pointed out, the term "middling sort" did not enter common usage until the 1640s). "'Sorts of People' in Tudor and Stuart England", in *The Middling Sort of People*, ed. by Jonathan Barry & Christopher Brooks (London: MacMillan: 1994), 41. In using the term "popular culture" I am essentially referring to "the social practices, patterns of consumption and daily experiences of the *majority* population of a society" rather than any sense of its use as a binary opposite to elite culture. Whilst this term can also be problematic, it helps to emphasise a sense that the folkloric faeries of the early modern period were familiar to many different social groups and a common feature in a variety of entertainments. Paul Prescott, "Shakespeare and Popular Culture", in *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. by Margreta de Grazia & Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 270.

¹³ Buccola, 113-32.

¹⁴ See also, Mary Ellen Lamb's "Taken by the Fairies", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (Fall 2000), 277-312.

¹⁵ A similar point has been made by Matthew Woodcock, *Fairy in The Faerie Queene* (Great Britain: Ashgate, 2004), 9-29, who argues that the “bookish” faeries of romance have often been overlooked by scholars more interested in faerie folklore and superstition (particularly representations of folklore found in the works of Shakespeare). Focusing on *The Faerie Queene*, Woodcock explores Spenser’s navigation of the diverse kinds of textual faeries that existed during the early modern period, describing them as “a sign with a negotiated referent, an artificial construction that actively invites interpretation to which varying meanings or significations can be assigned”, 28.

¹⁶ *Lost Plays Database*, <https://lostplays.folger.edu>, accessed May 8, 2019. Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson, *British Drama, 1533-1642: A Catalogue*, 9 Vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁷ Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 271; Helen Cooper, “Guy of Warwick, Upstart Crows and Mounting Sparrows”, in *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions in Biography*, ed. by Takashi Kozuka and J. R. Mulryne (Chippenham: Ashgate, 2006), 121-2.

¹⁸ Cooper, “Guy of Warwick”, 124-7. See also, John Peachman, “Links between *Mucedorus* and *The Tragical History, Admirable Achievements and Various Events of Guy Earl of Warwick*”, *Notes and Queries* 53, no. 4 (December 2006), 464-5.

¹⁹ *Guy of Warwick, 1661*, prep. by Helen Moore (Manchester: Manchester University Press for the Malone Society, 2007), 11. Hereafter cited in text.

²⁰ Cooper, “Guy of Warwick”, 128.

²¹ It is possible that the text was adapted from a longer production, designed to be performed by a strolling company of players, and covering the entire story of Guy’s life as told in the Middle English romances (Cooper, “Guy of Warwick”, 132).

²² The faerie king’s height in *Guy Earl of Warwick* appears to be a direct reference to Oberon in *Huon of Bordeaux*, who is described as being “of height but of thrée foote”. John Bouchier, *The ancient, honorable, famous, and delighfull historie of Huon of Bourdeaux* (London: Thomas Purfoot, 1601), n.pag. For more on *Huon of Bordeaux* as a source, see Helen Moore’s introduction to *Guy of Warwick, 1661*, xv.

²³ Donaldson, 63.

²⁴ Donaldson, 64.

²⁵ Riddell and Stewart, 45; Donaldson, 320-2.

²⁶ Frances Yates, *Shakespeare's Last Plays* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 115; David Norbook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 177.

²⁷ Thomas Willard, "Pimping for the Fairy Queen", in *Crime and Punishment in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, ed. by Albrecht Classen and Connie Scarborough (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 492-6; Piotr Spyra, "Ben Johnson's *The Alchemist*: The Essential Guide to Early Modern Fairy Belief", *Folklore* 128, no. 3 (2017), 292-3.

²⁸ In the case of the Wests, they were tried in Newgate for convincing a wealthy Hammersmith resident named Thomas Moore that they were "familiarily acquainted with the King and Queen of Fairies". As part of their deception, the Wests took the man into a vault where he was shown "two attired like the King and Queen of Fayries, and by them little Elues and Goblins, and in the same place an infinite company of bags, and upon them written, this is for *Thomas Moore*, this is for his wife". The same process was also carried out with the maid of the house, who claimed she had seen so much treasure arrayed around the faeries that she "insisted before the bench there could not be so little as seuenteen hundred thousand pound, all of which this cheatresse [Alice West] affirmed was for her master". *The Seuerall Notorious and levv'd Cousnages of Iohn VVest, and Alice VVest* (London: Edward Marchant, 1613). In another example, Judith Philips was accused of convincing a man from Hampshire to let her put a saddle on his back and to ride him around a tree behind his house. Philips had assured the man of her ability to help him find hidden treasure, and the ritual riding was a necessary step in allowing her to meet with the Queen of Faeries in order to obtain a vast wealth on his behalf. *The brideling, sadling and ryding, of a rich churle in Hampshire, by the subtile practise of one Iudeth Philips* (London: William Barley, 1595).

²⁹ Spyra, 296.

³⁰ Ibid, 306.

³¹ Spyra does very briefly acknowledge that Dapper's ritualised imprisonment in the privy relates in some way to the ritual tests imposed on the heroes of *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but the argument is not developed further than this brief observation (308).

³² A similar argument is raised by Peter Marshall in relation to critics who emphasise a top-down transmission of ideas in the context of faeries and demonology during the early modern period. For Marshall, to suggest that cultural transmission works in only one direction (i.e. the Reformist Church imposing its view of faeries as demonic on the rest of the population) is nonsensical. Ideas flowed in both directions, with high and low cultures influencing each other in equal measure. It is important to acknowledge, therefore, that folkloric faerie belief in the early modern period had been subject to exposure from ideas taken from romance literature over the previous four hundred years, just as romance literature initially adapted and incorporated imagery taken from Celtic and Breton oral tradition. "Protestants and Fairies in Early-Modern England", in *Living with Religious Diversity in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by C. Scott Dixon, Dagmar Freist and Mark Greengrass (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 158-9.

³³ Spyra, 300.

³⁴ Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays*, ed. by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³⁵ For Jonson's relationship with both London and Westminster, see Martin Butler, "Jonson's London and its theatres", in *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*, ed. by Richard Harp and Stanley Stewart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 15-6.

³⁶ "Many of Jonson's plays, *Epicene*, *The Alchemist* and *The Devil is an Ass* among them, mock the aspirant, socially mobile figure of the newly rich, satirizing their fashions and behaviours and implicitly supporting those aristocratic or conservative characters who wish to put them back 'in their place'". Clare McManus, 'Rank', in *Ben Jonson in Context*, ed. by Julie Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 245.

³⁷ Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 139.